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ABSTRACT

A survey of 830 institutions of higher education in the United States explored the status of initiatives to promote information literacy, which is defined as a subset of critical thinking skills that consists of an individual's knowing when he/she has an informational need and how to access, evaluate, and effectively use information. The survey found that, on a national basis, institutions in the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSACS) region may be leading other regions of the country in applying information literacy strategies on campus. Of the 259 MSACS respondents, 31 percent indicated that they have a "functional" information literacy program, 27 percent offered a course that focuses on information literacy abilities, and 19 percent integrated information literacy experiences into courses in all majors. The survey also found that 19 percent of MSACS respondents have developed formal assessments of students' information literacy skills, and that 38 percent provided faculty and staff development to support the information literacy program. MSACS institutions were, on average, above the national norms in these areas. Data is provided in six tables. (MDM)

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Information Literacy in Higher Education
A Report on the Middle States Region

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Abstract

A survey of 830 institutions of higher education nationwide, conducted by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), explored the status of initiatives to promote information literacy, which the National Forum on Information Literacy (NFIL) defines as a subset of critical thinking skills that consists of individuals' abilities to know when they have an informational need and to access, evaluate, and effectively use information. A preliminary tabulation of the data by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (CHE) demonstrates that on a national basis, institutions in the Middle States region may be leading other regions in applying information literacy strategies on campus. In addition, of the 259 Middle States respondents, 31 percent indicate that they have a "functional" information literacy program, 27 percent offer a course that focuses on information literacy abilities, and 19 percent integrate information literacy experiences into courses in all majors. Nineteen percent of these respondents have developed formal assessments of students' information literacy skills, and 38 percent provide faculty and staff development to support the information literacy program. It is important for CHE now to explore in greater depth some of the actual practices within the region to promote and assess information literacy strategies among students.

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The Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools accredits institutions of higher education in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, The Republic of Panama, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and other locations abroad.

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Information Literacy in Higher Education
A Report on the Middle States Region

Background

The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) conducted a national survey of colleges and universities in 1994 as part of a research project on information literacy, with the collaboration of the National Forum on Information Literacy (NFIL) and the various regional accrediting agencies.

For the purposes of this survey, ACRL and the accrediting agencies adopted the NFIL definition of information literacy as:

> ***a subset of critical thinking skills which consists of individuals' abilities to know when they have an informational need and to access, evaluate, and effectively use information.***

The Commission on Higher Education, Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (CHE) analyzed the ACRL tabulation of data from institutions nationwide, with emphasis on those in the Middle States region, to report on their answers to the following five questions:

1. Does your campus have a functional information literacy program?
2. Does your campus offer a course that focuses on the development of information literacy abilities?
3. Are information literacy experiences integrated into courses in all majors?
4. Are there formal assessments of students' information literacy performance?
5. Are there faculty and staff development efforts provided to undergird the information literacy program on your campus?

Limitations of the Data

The data from this survey, however, must be interpreted cautiously. First, there is little agreement among or between librarians, faculty, and administrators as to what actually constitutes "information literacy," given the evolution of the term from "library instruction" to "bibliographic instruction" to "information literacy." There is the prospect that many professionals define their programs as encompassing elements from each of the above terms, while others may be further evolving their understanding of what *is* or what *should be* into yet uncharted territory. There is also an unfortunate word association which could link information literacy with "computer literacy" and the increasingly common usage of the term "Information Age."

Second, the preamble to the survey questions contained the NFIL definition of information literacy, but the survey included no validating questions to ensure that the respondents in fact read and adopted that definition.

Third, many respondents probably would judge several other question to be imprecise. For example, the threshold question asked if there was "a functional information literacy program" on campus. The word "functional" means different things to people in different disciplines, and the word "program" also is subject to multiple interpretations, and their combined use apparently was not addressed. In addition, the third question refers to "all majors," which may have been highly restrictive for institutions that have made respectable progress in integrating information literacy into *some* or *most* majors.

Fourth, respondents were asked to "attach documentation" of their programs or to describe the program's "goals and objectives and how it fits into the curriculum." Approximately one-third of the respondents attached materials, but there has been no content analysis of such information at this point.

Preliminary Findings

The survey demonstrates that on a national basis, institutions in the Middle States region may be leading other regions in applying information literacy strategies on campuses. The survey also suggests several avenues for distinguishing between responding institutions on the basis of their program characteristics.

National and Middle States Perspectives

Most of the respondents were from the Middle States, North Central, and Southern regions (Table 1). The 259 Middle States respondents represent 52 percent of the 495 accredited institutions of higher education in the region. The ACRL data differ only marginally from data that CHE collects from institutions in its Annual Institutional Profile (AIP) reports. The AIP data show that 217 institutions have some type of information literacy initiative, which represents 44 percent of the total Middle States membership.

By comparison, responses were received from 31 percent of the institutions in the Western and Northwestern regions, 24 percent in the Southern, 22 percent in the North Central, and 18 percent in the New England regions.

Table 2 ranks the regions by the percentage of institutions within each region that responded, as shown in Table 1, and their deviation from the national average. It indicates that while Middle States institutions were consistently above the national average in the number responding affirmatively to all five questions in the ACRL survey, the progress actually being made in information literacy by other regions is also encouraging.

For example, institutions in the Western region were above the national average on four of the five questions (having a cumulative deviation of 3.2). On the other hand, two regions--North Central and Northwest--have cumulative deviations just below the national average. They are followed, in rank order, by the New England and Southern regions. While the Northwest region was at or above average for four questions, its gains were offset by

Table 1
National Distribution of Information Literacy Programs

[The following terms indicate the regions of the various regional accrediting agencies from which institutions of higher education responded: **Middle** (Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools), **NewEng** (New England Association of Schools and Colleges), **NorthC** (North Central Association of Colleges and Schools), **NorthW** (Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges), **Southrn** (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools), and **Westrn** (Western Association of Schools and Colleges).]

Question 1:
Does your campus have a functional information literacy program?

	Middle	NewEng	NorthC	NorthW	Southrn	Westrn	Total
n	259	36	213	46	191	85	830
Yes	79	6	40	7	26	19	171
%	31	17	19	15	14	22	21
Versus Norm	Above	Below	Just Below	Below	Below	Above	

Question 2:
Does your campus offer a course that focuses on the development of information literacy abilities?

	Middle	NewEng	NorthC	NorthW	Southrn	Westrn	Total
n	259	36	213	46	191	85	830
Yes	70	8	49	13	33	30	199
%	27	22	23	28	17	35	24
Versus Norm	Above	Just Below	Just Below	Above	Below	Above	

Question 3:
Are information literacy learning experiences integrated into courses in all majors?

	Middle	NewEng	NorthC	NorthW	Southrn	Westrn	Total
n	259	36	213	46	191	85	830
Yes	49	6	43	3	22	16	138
%	19	17	20	7	12	19	17
Versus Norm	Above	At	Above	Below	Below	Above	

Question 4:
Are there formal assessments of students' information literacy performance?

	Middle	NewEng	NorthC	NorthW	Southrn	Westrn	Total
n	259	36	213	46	191	85	830
Yes	49	3	33	8	31	13	135
%	19	8	16	17	16	15	17
Versus Norm	Above	Below	Just Below	At	Just Below	Just Below	

Question 5:
Are there faculty and staff development efforts provided to undergird the information literacy program on your campus?

	Middle	NewEng	NorthC	NorthW	Southrn	Westrn	Total
n	259	36	213	46	191	85	830
Yes	97	8	58	15	36	27	231
%	38	22	27	33	19	32	28
Versus Norm	Above	Below	Just Below	Above	Below	Above	

Table 2

Ranking of Regions
By Percentage of Institutions Responding and Their Deviation from the National Average

Question	National Average	Middle Pct	Middle Dev	NewEng Pct	NewEng Dev	NorthC Pct	NorthC Dev	NorthW Pct	NorthW Dev	Southrn Pct	Southrn Dev	Westrn Pct	Westrn Dev
No. 1	21	31	10	17	-4	19	-2	15	-6	14	-7	22	1
No. 2	24	27	3	22	-2	23	-1	28	4	17	-7	35	11
No. 3	17	19	2	17	0	20	3	7	-10	12	-5	19	2
No. 4	17	19	2	8	-9	16	-1	17	0	16	-1	15	-2
No. 5	28	38	10	22	-6	27	-1	33	5	19	-9	32	4
Avg. Deviation			5.4		-4.2		-.4		-1.4		-5.8		3.2
Rank			1		5		3		4		6		2

negative deviations in two areas, one where the question was inherently ambiguous ("functional" programs) and the other where the goal would be extremely difficult for any institution in any region (integration in all majors).

While the two leading regions, Middle States and Western, were vastly different in the total number of institutions responding (259 versus 85, respectively), the percentages within regions that responded to the five questions were strikingly similar overall. For example, institutions with functional programs constituted 31 percent of the Middle States sample and 22 percent of the Western; those with a course were 27 percent in the Middle States and 35 percent in the Western; information literacy was integrated in all majors at the rate of 19 percent in the Middle States and 19 percent in the Western; 19 percent of the Middle States institutions assessed performance and 15 percent did so in the Western; and 38 percent offered faculty and staff development in the Middle States, compared to 32 percent in the Western.

Within the Middle States region, 31 percent of the respondents indicated that they have a functional information literacy program, 27 percent have a specific course on the subject, 19 percent integrate information literacy skills in all majors, and 19 percent assess information literacy performance (Table 1). In the Western region, which has the next highest overall ranking, 22 percent have a functional program, 35 percent offer a course, 19 percent integrate information literacy skills, 15 percent assess, and 32 percent provide faculty and staff development.

Middle States Program Characteristics

The ACRL data confirm several intuitive assumptions that observers might make about the program characteristics identified by the five research questions: functional programs, specific courses, an integrated concept, assessment, and faculty and staff development. Additional perspectives were gained when institutions were classified by sector, utilizing a Carnegie-type classification.[1]

- **Functional Programs**. As a threshold question in the survey, program functionality--in spite of or because of its ambiguity--became a program characteristic that appears distinguish sharply the various respondents from each other. For example, significantly higher percentages of institutions with functional programs responded affirmatively to each of the four other survey questions, compared to the percentages of institutions without functional programs (Table 3).

  Specific Course and/or Integrated Concept. Table 3 indicates that, generally speaking, more institutions have a specific course on information literacy skills (70 institutions) than have attempted to integrate information literacy in all majors (49 institutions). Furthermore, of those with functional programs, 48 percent report that they have a specific course in information literacy, while only 18 percent of those without a functional program have a specific course.

  Faculty/Staff Development. Professional development to support an information literacy program is available at 85 percent of the institutions that have a functional program, compared to only 17 percent of the institutions without such a program (Table 3).

  Sectors. Institutions responded from each of six different Carnegie-type sectors. From 15 to 38 percent of the institutions in each sector have a functional program, 10 to 23 percent assess performance, and 42 to 54 percent provide faculty/staff development (Table 4).

  Assessment. The practice of assessing students' information literacy performance is far more likely at institutions with a functional program (43 percent, or 34 of 79 respondents), compared to only 7 percent (15 of 223 respondents) without a functional program. Moreover, among the 79 institutions with a functional program, institutions that assess and those that do not are relatively evenly divided (34 versus 45 institutions), compared to the sharp imbalance among the 180 with no functional program, where there are 15 with assessment and 165 without (Table 5).

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[1] The Carnegie-type classification used in the Middle States region reflects the highest degree an institution offers: **Two-year** institutions (offering Associate of Arts degrees) **Liberal Arts** (baccalaureate level), **Comprehensive** (masters level), **Doctoral**, **Research**, and **Specialized** (professional schools and institutions offering degrees in specialized fields).

Next Steps

While the survey findings are not surprising, they confirm that future efforts might be more profitably directed toward the 34 institutions that claim to have a functional program and also assess the information literacy performance of their students, with the possibility of making comparisons to an additional 15 institutions that assess but have no functional program. Any future study by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education should determine if these institutions actually meet the NFIL definition given in this report, the factors that constitute a "functional" program, and the outcomes that are assessed.

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Table 3
Functional and Not Functional Programs in the Middle States Region

	FUNCTIONAL [n=79]		NOT-FUNCTIONAL [n=180]	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Have a Course on Information Literacy	38	48	32	18
Information Literacy is Integrated in All Majors	36	46	13	7
There is Formal Assessment of Students' Performance	34	43	15	8
Provide Faculty and Staff Development	67	85	30	17

Table 4
Percentage of Institutions Meeting Five Program Characteristics [By Carnegie-Type Sector]

Sector Responding	Functional Programs	Offers an IL Course	Integrated in Majors	Assess IL Skills	Faculty Development
Two-Year [n=72]	36	14	22	22	42
Liberal Arts [n=60]	15	22	17	10	22
Comprehensive [n=66]	38	39	21	23	47
Doctoral [n=7]	29	29	14	14	29
Research [n=13]	23	46	15	23	54
Specialized [n=41]	34	32	15	20	34

Table 5

Assessment of Students' Information Literacy Performance

	Number with Assessment [n=49]	Number with No Assessment [n=210]
Institutions with a Functional Program [n=79]:		
Have an "IL" Course and "IL" Integrated	11	9
Have an "IL" Course and "IL" Not Integrated	10	8
No "IL" Course, but "IL" is Integrated	8	8
No "IL" Course, and "IL" Not Integrated	5	20
	34	45
Institutions with No Functional Program [n=180]:		
Have an "IL" Course and "IL" Integrated	2	5
Have an "IL" Course and "IL" Not Integrated	4	21
No "IL" Course, but "IL" is Integrated	4	2
No "IL" Course, and "IL" Not Integrated	5	137
	15	165

Table 6

Programs with Assessment [By Carnegie-Type Sector]

Sector		Functional	Not Functional	Total
Two-year	[n=72]	10	6	16
Liberal Arts	[n=60]	4	2	6
Comprehensive	[n=66]	11	4	15
Doctoral	[n= 7]	1	0	1
Research	[n=13]	1	1	3
Specialized	[n=41]	6	2	8
Total		34	15	49

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